

**U.S. Department of Justice**

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*Eastern District of Virginia*

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**NEWS RELEASE**

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Paul J. McNulty, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, Willard Dunham, Resident Agent in Charge of the Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms Office in Richmond, and Susan Kane, Chief of Operations, Office of Criminal Investigation, New Jersey Division of Taxation, announced the sentencing last week of Abdelnaser A. Sarameh, a U.S. citizen who emigrated to New Jersey from Jordan. On October 31, 2002, U.S. District Judge Richard Williams sentenced Sarameh to 24 months in federal prison. The Court also ordered the Sarameh to pay \$105,000.00 in restitution to the state of New Jersey for lost cigarette taxes.

The case is part of a cooperative federal/state/local law enforcement focus on cigarette smuggling between Virginia and the northeastern states. On March 18, 2002, a federal grand jury in Richmond indicted Sarameh on one count of conspiracy to smuggle contraband cigarettes, and one count of smuggling contraband cigarettes. Federal law provides that if more than 300 cartons of cigarettes are transported across state lines without payment of applicable state taxes, the cigarettes are deemed "contraband cigarettes" and the transportation of those cigarettes across state lines is a felony. The offense carries a maximum penalty of up to 5 years incarceration, and a fine of \$250,000 per count.

On July 23, 2002, Sarameh entered a guilty plea to Count Two of the Indictment, charging him with smuggling contraband cigarettes.

Between 1999 and 2002, Sarameh obtained orders from others for specific types and quantities of cigarettes, to be obtained in Virginia and delivered to New Jersey and New York City, without paying the applicable cigarette taxes or obtaining the required stamp to be placed on the cigarette packages and containers to evidence payment of the applicable cigarette taxes. In making these trips to Virginia two to three times per month, defendant Sarameh would typically rent a car at the Newark International Airport (New Jersey), drive to Virginia to obtain the "contraband cigarettes," and then return to New Jersey with the cigarettes, storing them in a rented public storage facility in Secaucus, New Jersey, until sold. During this period, Sarameh smuggled approximately 13,200 cartons of cigarettes causing New Jersey an estimated tax loss of \$105,000.00.

Sarameh had previously been charged with food stamp fraud in the Northern District of Ohio and was convicted of that offense. He committed the cigarette smuggling offense while on bond on the Ohio charges.

United States Attorney McNulty stated, "Cigarette smuggling is a growing problem throughout the country. It causes a significant financial loss to each of the affected states. This office is committed to coordinate with state law enforcement authorities to maximize the impact of these investigations and prosecutions, and deter such smuggling."

Assistant United States Attorney S. David Schiller prosecuted the case for the U.S. Attorney's Office.